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SUBJECT: WHAT LIES BENEATH ANKARA'S NEW FOREIGN POLICY

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[1](#)B. 09 ISTANBUL 466

[1](#)C. 09 ANKARA 1561 (EXDIS)

Classified By: Ambassador James Jeffrey for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

INTRODUCTION/COMMENT  
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[1](#)1. (C) There is much talk in chanceries and in the international media these days about Turkey's new, highly activist foreign policy, which unquestionably represents a transition not only from prior governments, but also from the AKP regime before the Gaza/Davos events, and before the ascent of Ahmet Davutoglu as Foreign Minister in April. Some commentaries are upbeat, but others, including many experts and editorial writers in the US, have expressed concern. The ruling AKP foreign policy is driven by both a desire to be more independently activist, and by a more Islamic orientation. Frankly, rational national interest, particularly trade opportunities and stability considerations, also drives Turkey's new slant. Major challenges with us in the coming months include the direction of Turkish-Israeli relations, the fate of the Protocols with Armenia, and the Turkish posture vis--vis Iran.

[1](#)2. (C) Does all this mean that the country is becoming more focused on the Islamist world and its Muslim tradition in its foreign policy? Absolutely. Does it mean that it is "abandoning" or wants to abandon its traditional Western orientation and willingness to cooperate with us? Absolutely not. At the end of the day we will have to live with a Turkey whose population is propelling much of what we see. This calls for a more issue-by-issue approach, and recognition that Turkey will often go its own way. In any case, sooner or later we will no longer have to deal with the current cast of political leaders, with their special yen for destructive drama and - rhetoric. But we see no one better on the horizon, and Turkey will remain a complicated blend of world class "Western" institutions, competencies, and orientation,

and Middle Eastern culture and religion. END INTRODUCTION.

## COMPONENTS OF POLICY

### "The Traditional Western"

13. (C) Turkish policy today is a mix of "traditional Western" orientation, attitudes and interests, and two new elements, linked with new operational philosophies: "zero conflicts" and "neo-Ottomanism." The traditional still represents the core of Turkish foreign policy, and is centered on cooperation and integration with the West. Its core is NATO, the customs union with the EU, and most significantly, the EU accession effort. This all began with the Ottoman effort to emulate the European great powers, and was propelled powerfully forward by Ataturk. Nevertheless the country was on the sidelines in World War II. It was only the threat of the USSR, and the dominance (and outstretched hand) of the US, that led to the "Turkey we know": tough combat partner in Korea, major NATO ally, US anchor in the Middle East. Much of this continues.

14. (C) Europe is by far Turkey's most important economic partner in terms of investment and trade. The EU accounts for 42 percent of Turkey's total trade, while the US accounts for a bit less than 5 percent. While the US is much less important in terms of trade statistics, it remains important in various sectors (e.g. energy, aviation, military), and in various ways. NATO is essential to and much respected by

ANKARA 00000087 002 OF 006

Turkey. (Note: The fact that "only" about one-third of the Turkish population in one poll see NATO as important to Turkey's security is actually a plus; on any poll Turks usually are overwhelmingly negative about any foreign engagement or relationship. But we should not be too sanguine here since support for NATO has been halved over the past decade. End Note) The military is armed by the US, and Turkey recognizes that many fires in its back yard -- from Iraq to Afghanistan and Pakistan -- can only be solved by close cooperation with and acceptance of US and NATO leadership. Finally, even AKP leaders know that much of their allure or "wasta" in the Middle East and elsewhere stems from their privileged position in key Western clubs. This traditional orientation may be shaken, or reduced, but as it has both significant buy-in by elites of all philosophies, and many concrete advantages, Turkey will not abandon it.

### "Zero Problems with Turkey's Neighbors"

15. (C) But this Turkey is trying to "post-modernize" itself. One major area of AKP effort has been to resolve problems with Turkey's immediate "near abroad." This effort stands in contrast with the "traditional" Turkish policy of letting these frozen conflicts fester, and is much more compatible with US and European interests. The list of Turkish initiatives under the AKP is impressive: accepting the Annan Plan in 2004 to resolve Cyprus, continuing the 1999 rapprochement with Greece, the opening to Armenia culminating in the signing of recognition protocols, warming and productive relations with both Baghdad and Erbil (the latter complemented by significant reforms in Turkey's relations with its own Kurdish population). The signature accomplishment of this policy is the wooing of Syria. While this road to Damascus in fact was paved by Syria's accommodation of prior Turkish governments' demands (relinquishing claims on Turkey's Hatay province, expelling Ocalan), it is touted by the Turks as a game-changer. As noted below, they have leveraged it to tackle a number of regional problems, from Lebanon to Iran.

16. (C) While this new approach is to be applauded, there is a fly in its ointment. Little of true practical and final accomplishment has been achieved. Cyprus is still split

(albeit the fault, at least in terms of the Annan plan, lies more with the Greek Cypriots and the EU); tensions with Greece in the Aegean continue; the Protocols with Armenia have not been ratified due to Turkish concerns about Nagorno-Karabakh; Iraq's instability and the KRG's unwillingness to do more against the PKK raise questions about the sustainability of Turkey's constructive Iraq policy; the rapprochement with Syria has not really produced any Syrian "flip" away from Iran. Granted, Turkey is dealing with some of the world's most difficult actors, and facing stiff opposition at home to making more concessions, but the proof of this pudding is yet to be seen.

"Neo Ottomanism"

17. (C) The idea of Turkey using its cultural and religious links to the Middle East to the advantage of both Turkish interests and regional stability is not new with the AKP, but has been given much more priority by it, in part because of the Islamic orientation of much of the party, including leaders Erdogan, Gul, and Davutoglu. Moreover, the AKP's constant harping on its unique understanding of the region, and outreach to populations over the heads of conservative, pro-US governments, have led to accusations of "neo-Ottomanism." Rather than deny, Davutoglu has embraced this accusation. Himself the grandson of an Ottoman soldier

ANKARA 00000087 003 OF 006

who fought in Gaza, Davutoglu summed up the Davutoglu/AKP philosophy in an extraordinary speech in Sarajevo in late 2009 (REF A). His thesis: the Balkans, Caucasus, and Middle East were all better off when under Ottoman control or influence; peace and progress prevailed. Alas the region has been ravaged by division and war ever since. (He was too clever to explicitly blame all that on the imperialist western powers, but came close). However, now Turkey is back, ready to lead -- or even unite. (Davutoglu: "We will re-establish this (Ottoman) Balkan").

18. (C) While this speech was given in the Balkans, most of its impact is in the Middle East. Davutoglu's theory is that most of the regimes there are both undemocratic and illegitimate. Turkey, building on the alleged admiration among Middle Eastern populations for its economic success and power, and willing to stand up for the interests of the people, reaches over the regimes to the "Arab street." Turkey's excoriating the Israelis over Gaza, culminating in the insulting treatment of President Peres by Erdogan at Davos in 2009, illustrates this trend. To capitalize on its rapport with the people, and supposed diplomatic expertise and Ottoman experience, Turkey has thrown itself into a half-dozen conflicts as a mediator. This has worked well, as noted above, with Iraq, and was quite successful in the Syrian-Israeli talks before Gaza. Turkey has also achieved some limited success on Lebanon and in bringing Saudi Arabia and Syria together. As noted below, however, this policy brings with it great frictions, not just with us and the Europeans but with many supposed beneficiaries of a return to Ottoman suzerainty. Furthermore, it has not achieved any single success of note.

WHY THE CHANGE?

19. (C) Various factors explain the shifts we see in Turkish foreign policy beyond the personal views of the AKP leadership:

-- Islamization: As reported REF B, religiosity has been increasing in Turkey in past years, just as has been seen in many other Muslim societies. The AKP is both a beneficiary of, and a stimulus for, this phenomenon. However, bitter opposition within Turkey against domestic "pro-Islamic" reforms (e.g., head scarves) has frustrated the AKP, and a more "Islamic" or "Middle Eastern" foreign policy offers an alternative sop for the AKP's devout base.

-- Success: Despite its problems, Turkey over the past 50 years has been a success story, rising to the 16th largest economy and membership in the G-20. This, along with its extraordinary security situation compared to all other regional states, and democratic system, encourage a more active -- and more independent -- leadership role in regional and even global affairs.

-- Economics: one secret of Turkish success has been its trade and technology-led economic growth. This growth is in good part thanks to its customs union with the EU, by far its biggest export market, and resulting investment from the EU, as well as decades of technology transfer and educational assistance from the U.S. Nevertheless, with exports to the EU down due to the 2008-2009 crisis, Turkey is looking for new markets, particularly in the hydrocarbon rich Arab world, Iran, Russia, and Caucasus/Central Asia. They have money, and strong import demand, and Turkey is dependent on them for its oil and gas. These countries, however, (along with China-another Turkish export target) tend much more than the EU and North America to mix politics and trade. To some

ANKARA 00000087 004 OF 006

degree the West thus is taken for granted and economic priority is directed towards relations with the Middle East and "Eurasia."

-- Civilians ascendant: Erdogan's political success -- together with a number of messy scandals resulting in public investigation -- has meant that the Turkish General Staff now plays a much smaller role in defining Turkey's foreign policy. Turkey's support to NATO is still strong, but it now lacks the suspicion of Russia which the cold-war instinct of General Staff brought to the mix.

-- EU disillusionment: Both popular and elite Turkish opinion has recently grown much more pessimistic about eventual EU membership -- or even its value. The reasons for this are complex, but include the shifting mood in Europe towards Islam, the replacement of "pro-Turkey" leaders in France and Germany by Sarkozy and Merkel, both decidedly cool towards Turkey's EU membership, and a sense in Turkey of distance from and lack of sympathy for Europe.

-- Relativization of the Western anchor. An op-ed in the Financial Times by Gideon Rechman on January 4 noted correctly the tendency of the "young giants" -- South Africa, Brazil, India, and Turkey -- to pursue Third Worldish policies and rhetoric even while benefitting enormously from the globalized trade and international security created and maintained by the "West." That certainly characterizes Turkey. With the end of the cold war, relative success in the struggle with the PKK, and the "taming" of Syria, Iraq, and (at least from Turkey's point of view) Iran, Turkey's need for NATO and U.S. security is reduced. Its dependence on Western trade, investment, technology transfer and educational exchange remains critical, but is regarded as a "free good" that Turkey deserves and does not have to expend effort for. Relations with its various new friends in the North-East-South or on the other hand require effort which is facilitated by some downplaying of Turkey's Western anchor.

DAVUTOGLU DISCONTENTS

110. (C) The AKP's new approach to international affairs receives mixed reviews inside and outside Turkey. It is not a major factor in the AKP's relative popularity, but several elements of it (unfortunately, those we are least happy with) do appeal to voters. Criticism of Israel post-Gaza is overwhelmingly popular, and the relatively soft Turkish position on Iran -- a country about which many Turks are skeptical -- is presumably helpful with a narrow, but for Erdogan's electoral fate important, group of Islamic voters associated with former PM Erbakan.

¶11. (C) Nevertheless, many in Turkey's large westernized elite see the Islamic Outreach as a complement to the alleged AKP plan to Islamize Turkish society, and complain bitterly about their country's losing its western moorings. The Nationalist segment in Turkey, mobilized most by the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), sees the AKP's compromises on Armenia, the KRG in northern Iraq, Cyprus, etc, as a betrayal of diaspora "Turks" (the Iraqi Turkomen, Azeris, Turkish Cypriots, etc) and charges that the AKP is trying to replace the Republic's organizing principle of "Turkism" with the broader Islamic "Umma." The Republican People's Party (CHP), the lead opposition party, attacks AKP foreign policy relatively ineffectively with a mix of MHP-like nationalist rhetoric and "abandoning the west" criticism.

¶12. (C) But it is in the EU that the Erdogan foreign policy of late has run into the heaviest of sailing. To some degree

ANKARA 00000087 005 OF 006

European angst at Turkey's "new direction" is viewed as an excuse to pummel Turkey to score domestic points among anti-foreigner elements. But there is real concern in Europe, made manifest by the Rasmussen NATO SecGen issue last April. Europeans were furious with Turkey's presenting itself as the "Islamic" voice or conscience in NATO, having consulted with Middle Eastern States before talking to its NATO allies. Extrapolating that behavior into the even more diversity-intolerant EU is a nightmare. Erdogan's foreign (and domestic) policy orientation conjures up not just a clash of Christianity and Islam, but the spectre of a "meld" of Europe and the Middle East, and of Europe's secularism with oriental religiosity. Davutoglu and others argue that Turkey's "success" as a coming Middle East power makes it more attractive to the EU -- giving Europe a new foreign policy "market" through Turkey. While some in Europe appear interested in this idea, ironically including Turkey EU membership skeptic France, this does not seem to carry much weight in most European capitals, let alone populations.

¶13. (C) Finally, not all of the ex-Ottomans look with fondness on their past under the Pashas, or yearn for Turkey's return. Reaction among many in the Balkans to Davutoglu's Sarejevo speech (REF A) was quite strong. In the Middle East itself, the Arab street might applaud Turkey's populist and essentially cost-free support for more radical elements, but it's not particularly appreciated by rulers (although Turkey seems to have made some progress with Syria, brokered a rapprochement between President Bashir and Saudi King Abdullah, and has had some role in resolving the Lebanon cabinet stalemate). Sooner or later, though, Turkey will have to produce results, take risks, commit real resources, and take hard decisions to augment a policy now consisting mainly of popular slogans, ceaseless trips, and innumerable signatures on MOUs of little importance. The experience with Iran, which despite significant Turkish verbal support and wooing, appears uninterested in granting Turkey any concessions, or agreeing to a Turkish lead in mediation efforts, is telling.

THE PROBLEM FOR THE US  
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¶14. (C) Turkey's new foreign policy is a mixed bag for us. Having regional heavyweights take on burdens, thereby relieving us, has long been a desired goal of US policy, but it comes with a certain loss of control. Nevertheless, on a whole host of key issues of supreme importance to us -- Afghanistan and Pakistan, cooperation in and on Iraq, NATO efforts (although a leading Turkish role in Missile Defense will not be easy) -- Turkey is a crucial ally, and our use of Incirlik, Habur gate, and Turkish airspace for our Iraq and Afghanistan operations is indispensable. Its "zero conflicts" initiatives, which have moved Turkey forward on more of the key bilateral spats -- Cyprus, Greece, Kurds, Northern Iraq, Armenia -- than we have seen with any other



Turkish government, also support U.S. interests.

¶15. (C) Nevertheless, these latter issues illustrate two problems. At least in Turkish eyes, on this complex of issues the US, especially the media, interest groups, and Congress, default to a "blame Turkey" posture regardless of whatever it does. Second, Turkey has repeatedly run into trouble actually consummating these various openings -- the Armenian protocols being the best example, but continued overflights of Greek islands and domestic opposition to the Kurdish opening are also relevant. What we fear is that this inability to bring to conclusion foreign policy initiatives will affect not just the above, but most Turkish policy, given the over-extension of Davutoglu and his team, and a

ANKARA 00000087 006 OF 006

tendency to substitute rhetoric for long term investment of diplomatic, military, and assistance capital. (Fortunately, Afghanistan/Pakistan and Iraq are the two major exceptions to this tendency.)

¶16. (C) The greatest potential strategic problem for the US, however, and the one that has some of the commentators howling, is the Turks neo-Ottoman posturing around the Middle East and Balkans. This "back to the past" attitude so clear in Davutoglu's Sarajevo speech, combined with the Turks' tendency to execute it through alliances with more Islamic or more worrisome local actors, constantly creates new problems. Part of this is structural. Despite their success and relative power, the Turks really can't compete on equal terms with either the US or regional "leaders" (EU in the Balkans, Russia in the Caucasus/Black Sea, Saudis, Egyptians and even Iranians in the ME). With Rolls Royce ambitions but Rover resources, to cut themselves in on the action the Turks have to "cheat" by finding an underdog (this also plays to Erdogan's own worldview), a Siladjic, Mish'al, or Ahmadinejad, who will be happy to have the Turks take up his cause. The Turks then attempt to ram through revisions to at least the reigning "Western" position to the favor of their guy. Given, again, the questioning of Western policy and motives by much of the Turkish public and the AKP, such an approach provides a relatively low cost and popular tool to demonstrate influence, power, and the "we're back" slogan.

¶17. (C) This has been, so far, manageable, if at times high maintenance, in the Balkans and Mideast, although the damage to Israeli-Turkish relations remains serious. If the Turks are genuine in their desire to draw Syria away from Iran, and if they begin achieving real success rather than telephone books worth of questionable protocols, then that will be of benefit to us all. But with Iran itself it is a different story. REF C describes the background to the Turkish relationship with Iran, one more complicated than with their ex-Ottoman Arab and other subjects. Trade/hydrocarbon interests, Turkish aversion to sanctions stemming from the first Gulf War, Erdogan's vocal "third worldism" and certain domestic political considerations all push Turkey in the wrong direction. Unlike with many of the other issues, however, Turkey will have to stand and be counted on Iran, in the Security Council, with MD, and in implementation of UN or US sanctions. This will have a profound effect on relations second only to the fate of the Armenian protocols over the next year.  
Jeffrey

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